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ABSTRACT

Findings from a project that utilized student input in the restructuring of school practices are presented in this paper. The 6-month doctoral project was implemented in an urban middle school. Methodology was based on solicitation of student input about classroom practices and data collection of school and departmental issues, which resulted in policy and practice modifications. Outcomes included increased student involvement in the decision-making process and collaborative leadership. Findings point to the importance of developing a caring connection between students, teachers, and administrators; collaboration; and the value of student voices for improving student learning and staff development. (8 references) (LMI)

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RESTRUCTURING SCHOOL PRACTICE THROUGH STUDENT VOICES

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Introduction

At our urban middle school, which serves more than one-thousand students, ages 11-14, a doctoral study was conducted over a sixth month period which involved students as co-researchers. Students worked with the university researcher to investigate the learning process and conditions in which students learn. The researcher worked three days each week for six hours each day, for a period of four months. For two months following, the researcher worked once each week on the campus. The original design focused around one teacher, a member of a four member interdisciplinary team which served eighth graders, and a dozen students. During this study, the work was expanded to include the three additional teaching members of the team. In addition to the classroom practices which the students examined, school-wide and departmental issues were explored. Policies and practices were modified as a result of the data collected, and processes were put into place to address the identified issues and concerns. Students gained confidence as they found their own voices, and then were nurtured to expand the influence of the study's findings to impact school-wide short and long term changes (Soo Hoo, 1991b).

The role of the external change agent will be discussed as it affected the principal. The use of student voices on school and classroom practices will be examined. The use of this approach as a staff development model to impact changing school practices, and the resulting changes in school leadership will also

be reviewed. Implications for public educators on a broader scale will be considered.

External Change Agent

The study was conducted by a researcher not connected with the everyday workings of the school. This model posed some dilemmas for the site administrator, but provided a significantly different look at a school and its problems. This was a rich opportunity, but one that a principal must be prepared for (Straus as cited in Soo Hoo, 1991a). With loyalties to the study and to the researchers, a principal opens up a vulnerability, both to one's leadership and to one's school practices, with an underlying expectation that once issues are uncovered, they will be addressed. That was clearly not the case when the study began. While the process for collecting data was clear, the original focus was more narrow. Impacting school wide practice was not on the agenda, nor was a challenge to the way the school operated in the eyes of students expected.

It is important to understand that the researcher worked painstakingly to develop a rapport and trust with the principal. Without this foundation, allowing a researcher into classrooms, wandering through hallways, and generally collecting information and opinions about the workings of the school through the eyes and voices of students, would have been intimidating and confrontive. Even with the trust, the change agent collected information which forced me to

confront issues I had not chosen to deal with, to see myself and my leadership style through a different lens, and to show a vulnerability often hidden from adults on the campus.

Guiding me through this process, was the belief that students have to be active participants in their learning, and following, so do teachers. Little did I realize when this project began, how far it would go, how many issues and school-wide policies would be exposed and addressed, and how strongly the foundation would be laid for the honoring of student voices in school-wide decision-making. Throughout the study, my values and beliefs were challenged. I was forced to take an unbiased look at both school and classroom practices which focused on the child, the teachers, the curricular structure and practice, and the governance issues throughout the school.

Most secondary schools are organized and run for efficiency. As the researcher and the staff examined and worked with the findings from the study, I found that the efficiency mode contradicted the newer caring mode we were developing among the adults. Questioning whether we would compromise efficiency and accepted routines for those new practices which reflected a caring culture, caused anxiety and dilemmas for many adults. To get students motivated to be in their seats when the tardy bell rang, the school practice was to call unexpected "lockouts," which caught students tardy at the bell and added the consequence of detention to the tardy. Students caught the negative, "gotcha" attitude of the security guard who called and monitored the lockout process.

Rather than using positive incentives for those who continually came to class on time, the school practice was focused on the negative reinforcement of those who came late to class. Elimination of lockouts caused teachers and the security guard great concern, believing students would now increase their tardy behavior. Incentives were increased for those students with no tardies for a six week grading period. To firmly establish teacher expectations for on-time student behavior, teachers consistently now have warm-up exercises ready for students when the bell rings, and expect them to be in their seats working at the start of class.

Decisions about teacher staff development rested with a small council and with the administrative support staff. Release time and staff development time was planned at the end of the previous year for the next school year, and included limited discretionary time for individual teams of teachers. Time was always used for preset goals, and never included students. When substitute release time was requested by the team of teachers in the study to allow the teachers to work directly with the students on their curricular issues, it changed the way staff development was initiated and structured. The teachers identified their need, which was different from other teams, and structured their time to include students in the curricular planning process. Other teams quietly watched and questioned the intensity of the work, the excitement, the productivity and the value of their choices.

The school discipline system was traditionally managed and modified as

needed by the administrative team. Following the study, a full day of release time was provided to address the issues raised by students and staff regarding discrepancies and problems with the merit system for discipline monitoring. The five teachers who were elected to the Faculty Advisory Council, the two vice principals, and four student co-researchers, provided a working forum where the entire discipline monitoring and incentive systems were redefined and improved. They continue to work together periodically to assess successes and problems.

The school site council, required by the State to govern the school improvement funds the school receives, included several elected students. Typically they sat quietly at meetings, listening to the adult business, and participating only when called on. This year, the students have actively participated, continually raise issues and concerns, and offer solutions and strategies to address school-wide issues. Meetings have become lively, and are developing into a true shared decision-making forum.

The processes initiated as a result of the study, and the findings which were shared with the staff, have now caused children to be placed at the center of decisions at the school site. Decisions are being measured against their effect on the student, a significant contrast to prior practice. School restructuring efforts are actively discussed and planned to focus on student powerful learning in the classroom. The faculty recently voted overwhelmingly to support a staff-written plan for school-wide restructuring which challenges us to continue to move

forward in redefining practices in assessment, governance, instruction and community involvement, and all are based on a caring connection for students. While all of our practices are not completely transformed, these examples evidence some of the many changes in practice which have occurred in the last year at the school site with the support of the outside change agent.

Student Voices

Students must be active participants in their learning. This premise has guided much of my direction with staff during the past six years. It continually causes me to massage instructional issues, and hold a mirror up to teachers when passive learning is occurring in classrooms. The students in this study caused me to take this premise to new boundaries--that of trusting students as mature adolescents (Soo Hoo, 1991a) to be involved in the governance and decision-making at the school. They reminded me of another constituency that must be included in decision-making at the school. In addition, they raised staff concern about the validity of including students in any decision-making process that involved curriculum, policies, or procedures at the school. Involving students threatened the way the school had been governed, and challenged the assumptions and understandings teachers had about the role of students in school. In addition to dealing with the governance issues, students sensitized me to the concept that teachers often operate with a different rhythm in the classroom, and it is rare that

a student's rhythm or needs are considered when making instructional decisions.

Through this study, it became clearer that time was needed, with teachers and students working together, to explore student voices within the context of a specific team of teachers, and within a specific set of curricular goals. While this model provided us with a way to honor student voices, it is not the only model considered as we face new issues and concerns. Just as the students and the adults in this study constructed their own meaning from the experience, other students in collaboration with their teachers must be allowed to explore the relationship as well.

Students brought up a significant finding--that there must be a caring connection between the adults and the students with whom they work. Students talked about an "attitude" that some of the teachers had. When students experienced the "attitude" they shut off learning, and were not engaged (Soo Hoo, 1991b). The importance of this finding is not to be underestimated. We know in middle schools, that a student doesn't care how much a teacher knows, until he knows how much a teacher cares. This premise has been a guiding point as our school has transitioned from a junior high to middle school. However, old habits die hard, and teachers' expectations and understandings of traditional teacher-student relationships are hard to change. This message, while appearing to be simplistic, should underlie all interactions between adults and students in a school. The ethos of caring throughout the entire school, should permeate the instructional interaction between teachers and students, the governance and

decision-making processes and the curricular planning and strategies for implementation. The necessity of this thread throughout the school must not be underestimated, both in its importance, and in the difficulty to achieve the overall culture of a caring connection for students in a secondary school.

Arhar (1992) found that adolescents have particularly strong needs to develop bonds with peers, adults, and social groups on their way to forming a sense of identity. She recommends that principals can strengthen student social bonds to school by strengthening positive bonds within relationships with peers, teachers, and the school itself. I put this quality of caring before technical teaching skills, for I believe that you can teach teachers technical skills, and you can expand their repertoire of teaching strategies. However, it is almost impossible to teach a teacher to care, unless they desire to connect with young adolescents. It is a pivotal characteristic for the entering teacher, and one that is essential to reaching students and impacting their learning. Poplin (1992) states that feminine theory suggests that growth happens in conjunction with others to whom we feel connected and for whom we care. Lieberman (1984) found that for most teachers, it is the personal interaction rather than the instructional interaction that is the most valued. Lieberman states that when the rewards from the interactions between students and teachers are plentiful, teachers are energized and thrive. This was evidenced in the teachers' work and classroom practice following the major part of the study, has been felt beyond the team and has been recognized consistently by outside visitors to the school and to

classrooms.

Staff Development Model

The traditional staff development model imposes the right method upon the teacher, determining that the leader or the chosen leaders know the best way to do things. This model had guided the intensive staff development efforts underway at the school site during the last six years. While a further step included building the capacity of the school staff by training teachers to become staff trainers and coaches, there was still the underlying premise that the principal or the director of curriculum had determined what area needed training (cooperative learning, critical thinking, writing across the curriculum, interdisciplinary units, etc.)

Barth (1990) discusses the power for school change as lying within the faculty and staff who inhabit a school. He encourages investment in teachers, with the confidence that they will be able to make the changes necessary to restructure and change schools. Little (1987) discusses the professional relations some schools create among teachers. She states that something is gained when teachers work together, when the isolation of the classroom is broken. Teachers enthusiasm for teaching increases when they are involved in collective efforts to learn and apply new ideas. (Little, 1981 as cited in Little, 1987). This approach to building collegiality for teachers as well as for students has had a significant impact on the staff development models currently in use at the school. While I believe there is not a single approach to staff development and curriculum

improvement, the opportunity for staff to collegially work on common curriculum interests has had the greatest impact on improvement of classroom practices and staff morale.

This project provided collaborative time for the teachers and students to work together on issues of curriculum, choice for students, and active learning strategies. Just as teachers have the right to discover what is important to them, through peer work, students must also be allowed that right as well. This reinforced the school priority of cooperative active classrooms, where students did not work alone.

We have actively utilized cooperative learning strategies as a school for five years, in varying levels of implementation. Students have come to expect active classrooms and group work. Results from the study (Soo Hoo, 1991b) indicated that students liked the active rather than the passive role, and believed that the power to choose as well as to be actively engaged, enhanced their learning. Teachers, in the study, also reflected on staff meetings, and the preference to active involvement, versus passive listening. Just as we learn what makes learning powerful for students, we must translate the findings to adults, and to staff development models utilized at a school site to restructure teaching practices, and classroom strategies. Today, most staff meetings and all staff development activities are teacher led, modeled on the best teaching practices and strategies we know. Teacher enthusiasm and morale reflects this change, with increased energy, implementation of new strategies, and a norm of collaboration

that is expected on the campus, in the interdisciplinary teams, in departments, and in school-wide restructuring and decision-making processes. While the principal is clearly at the head, no longer is the principal directing all improvement and curriculum efforts. The improvement strategies include many active and important teacher and student working groups, and staff meetings are structured to include cross-department groupings with active dialogue and input from participants. This is clearly more difficult to plan, organize and manage, but the energy and productivity among the staff has soared, and the gains we are making in classroom practice and student achievement are significant.

Staff development strategies are in transition. They embody a variety of approaches, all with the norms of collaboration and collegiality as underlying assumptions. There are still meetings which focus on preset ideas, following up on district and site priorities such as thinking-meaning centered curriculum, reading across the curriculum, and intermediate cooperative learning strategies. However, in addition to the school-wide approach, teams are provided with quality time to explore their issues, build interdisciplinary units with student exhibitions to demonstrate mastery, and to work directly with students.

The principal's role has changed from the leader as solution, to the leader as enabler of solutions. (Fullan, 1992). Fullan (1992) believes that principals do well developing collaborative work cultures to help staff deal with innovations. Principals should concentrate on fostering norms of collegiality that respect individuality; norms of continuous improvement, problem-coping and conflict-

resolution strategies. (Fullan, 1990 as cited in Fullan, 1992).

Different teams have worked with students and utilized student voices in different ways. Just as there is not one way to listen to students or one way to teach, there is not one way that teachers should engage and involve their students in decisions that impact classroom practices. The school has moved forward with the underlying assumption that students are most important, and that our decisions must focus on powerful learning for all students. As the leader, I am gaining comfort in accepting more than one approach to staff development. As my perspective was widened, and continues to be refined, I am coming to believe that a multi-pronged approach, with attention to school-wide and small group collaborative work, based on common principles for student success, is what has helped to transform and restructure our classroom practices.

Changing School Practices

From the study, students told us that the school-wide discipline system was unfair. They brought up double standards, such as not being allowed to be tardy, but having their teachers arrive to class after the bell rang. (Soo Hoo, 1991b). The students also brought up perceived injustices in the physical education policies and classes, including the dislike of activities for eighth grade students which focused on body coordination and heightened their feelings of negative body images, such as gymnastics and swimming. In truth, students had very little voice in affecting school practices. Some weeks, the biggest decision made at the

student council meeting was a choice of a disc jockey for the upcoming dance. Never had the school administration asked what students had to say about school-wide policies and practices.

As a result of the data collection, and work with the researcher, students met with the principal to review their concerns. As with effective instructional conferencing, students began the list with the things that were going well, and primed the meeting with refreshments. Following the introduction and presentation of problems, I probed the students as to possible solutions to the problems they were raising. I took careful notes, although the major ideas stuck in my mind without the writing task. We agreed to meet with the adults affected by the issues, and see if we could resolve some of the problems.

Meeting with the physical education department was an awesome task. The physical education department is rarely the department the principal chooses to challenge, particularly when so many reform efforts are underway throughout a school. The students were challenging the instructional units, the grading practices, and the dressing policies. When I approached the physical education department, there was a high level of anxiety, with an overall question of why the administration was listening to students. The issue of power, and who makes the ultimate decision as to curriculum and grading was raised by the staff. The researcher had found that the new nurturing ambiance found generally throughout the school was not evident, through the students eyes, in the physical education department. During the meeting organized by the principal with the

physical education department and the student co-researchers, the adult body language showed the high level of concern--crossed arms and legs, a reclined seated position, posturing away from the center of the conversation, and quiet stern faces.

The students actually shared some of the same concerns the teachers had voiced in previous meetings with the administrators. Students voiced strong dislike with the required gymnastics unit. The eighth grade teachers often discussed the negative interaction with students in gymnastics, and the resulting need of a more police-like teacher behavior to manage the students during the unit of activity. As a facilitator, the principal pointed out commonalities, and students offered possible solution strategies. Initial tension and resistance, gave way over time, to a more positive collaborative effort by the department members as they began to own some of the struggle, and saw an opportunity to shape changes they were asked to make.

Staff release time was provided to visit other schools, as well as time for the physical education department members to review and alter policies and practices. A refined grading system was instituted for the following year which addressed the concerns raised by students but did not compromise the basic expectations of a balanced physical education program already designed for our early adolescents. In addition, new curricular units were added for eighth grade students, and several were dropped. The input came directly from the students and fairly reflected the student body's perceptions. Through this process of

encouraging student voice, practices were refined to better meet the developing adolescent attitude and level of maturity, through collaborative work with the adults and the students on the campus.

The teachers had independently identified the school-wide discipline system as needing to be reexamined. Taking advantage of the Faculty Advisory Council's recommendation to relook at the discipline system, a collaborative effort was undertaken with the administrators, teachers and students. Through the task force process, an improved and expanded incentive program was developed, along with a new record keeping system for infractions which corresponds to the six week grading period, rather than the 18 week semester period. The results were far more thorough with the collaborative group process, than if the administration had taken the complaint from teachers and students separately to redo the discipline system. Now, as the following school year comes to a close, a cooperative committee will revisit the system, assess the successes and problems, and make a recommendation for improvement.

These task force approaches to problem solving required pupil free time for staff and students to work together, and a commitment to collaborative problem solving which valued student input. In addition to the specific areas discussed above, the School Site Council, governing the use of School Improvement funds, has a strong active voice of four students, contrary to the quiet voices of the year before. The staff is learning how to encourage student voices, and how to value their involvement in the improvement process at school.

In addition, the student council has taken a larger, more vocal role, with the request to attend all PTA meetings so they can discuss and influence the parents' decisions and expenditure of funds. Students regularly meet with the principal to address issues and concerns. Processes are instituted which involve groups of people who will own the decisions and the follow-through for problem-solving.

Pupil-free time is allocated to the interdisciplinary teams for curricular planning and for intervention strategies. Teams are now involving students in the decisions for curricular units as well as for activities within the team. One team plans directly with parents, and engages them in goal setting and resource identification. Two teams are including parents in the year-end exhibition of mastery that all seventh grade students will undertake, culminating an integrated thematic unit of study. Clearly the norms of collaborative planning and problem solving have transcended the study's processes and are impacting school-wide practices on a regular basis.

Changing School Leadership

Before this study began, the leadership at the site was shared among administrators and teachers. Curricular improvement strategies depended upon teacher leadership and administrative support. Now, students are involved in site leadership in new and more significant ways. Just as they feel more connected to the institution itself (Arhar, 1992) as they are involved in problem-solving and decision-making processes, their impact is broader, and the decisions are more

important and longer-lasting. Students are often overheard in the counseling office saying that things are different this year, and that adults really listen to what they have to say. While this does not permeate the entire institution, no staff member would deny the importance of the student and of the student's perspective. Student voices are valued and are part of the entire decision-making processes in use at the school.

The collaborative norm of leadership, with teachers working with teachers, teachers working with students, and administrators working with teachers and students is a major restructuring direction at the school. It challenges existing value systems, and the assumptions upon which secondary school structures were organized many years ago. In addition, it challenges the role of the principal and the administrative leaders at a school. Value systems are questioned as new roles are assumed. While my leadership style is naturally collaborative, the idea of listening to students, and involving them in significant governance and curricular decisions at the middle school did not naturally occur. Just as students and teachers must explore their own learning to construct meaning for themselves, such is the case for the site principal as well. As I watched and participated with students in new decisions beyond the disc jockey choice, I learned of the power of student empowerment and involvement. Not that the adults do not retain the major decisions at the site, but student voices are becoming louder each month. As students find their voices in a climate where they are cared for and nurtured, they tell us a lot about how we can improve learning in the classroom, and

improve the school environment outside of the classroom. With the help of an outside change agent, my vision broadened, and my value system was challenged. As I allowed myself to be vulnerable, just as the teachers and students did in this study, as I let go of old assumptions and learning, and became comfortable with the resulting disequilibrium, I was able to grasp new perspectives and strong values about the importance of student voices as they impact school leadership and changing school practices.

Conclusion

Listening to student voices is a powerful way to gain insights into school and classroom practice. It takes time to help students find their voices, working with them to collect data while building trust and confidence that adults will listen. With the myriad of tasks a principal faces each day, with predictable fragmentation and interruptions, an external change agent is invaluable in furthering major restructuring efforts on a school campus. The researcher allows the issues to stay focused and clear, when the day-to-day operations of a school can cloud the picture, and drain the principal's energy to deal with them. Providing an impartial sounding board, built on trust, confidentiality and a common interest in powerful learning for students, helps site leaders to address serious instructional issues at a school site which will directly influence the instructional practices in the classroom. A commitment by the site administrator to listen, to provide resources to address problems, and to follow through on

plans is essential if we are to impact the lives of students in our schools and to provide teachers with the confidence and skills to engage students in powerful learning experiences. Relationships among all of the stakeholders in a school site must be valued (Arhar, 1992). It is the principal's responsibility to ensure that school practices reflect a caring connection, the importance of collaboration, and the valuing of student voices, if we are to impact significant long term change for our students.

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